

# HOLT'S

AUCTIONEERS OF FINE MODERN & ANTIQUE GUNS

## IN THE GUNROOM

“I am a ‘people’ person,” says Nick in a reflective moment. “People have always fascinated me, and that’s what originally drew me to guns – all the stories about their owners, and the excitement; the horror... The drama.” Over time I have learned that stories is Holt-speak for provenance, and each *Holt’s* expert, (male and female), covered by Nick’s blanket term, “my boys” shares his obsession with the provenance of the guns consigned to them for sale. In creating the company, he gave full rein both to that very basic human need for stories and his own predilection for drama. In turn, this supplied the company with its USP in the gun trade. “The minute you start to tell a story,” he says, “people light up. A gun is a gun, and it’s reasonably easy to get a feel for the price of any gun - until, that is, you put a story, that gun’s provenance, into the mix. Then no one but the buyer knows what that gun is worth. The sky is the limit.” Two guns in this particular sale, Lots 1415 and 1701, catapult us back in time. These Lots offer a unique snapshot of a world we left behind - one is a Purdey owned by aviation pioneer, Sir Tommy Sopwith CBE, the other a William Evans owned by World War II fighter ace, Air Commodore Bertie Wootten CBE. And their inclusion in this sale is serendipitous for 2010 marks the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Britain, a pivotal point when England was, an American senator told the House and Senate Foreign Affairs committee in Washington, “in the tightest spot of her history”. Invasion loomed; everything would depend on the RAF.

When the battle began on July 10<sup>th</sup> 1940, with only 640 fighters our airmen took on the might of the Luftwaffe’s 2600 bombers and fighters. Yet on August 8<sup>th</sup>, MP and diarist Sir Chips Channon was able to write: “A great air battle over the Channel, and a vast number of German aeroplanes have been brought down over the coast! our Air Force is sublime.” Just days later he was mourning the death of a personal friend in a Spitfire ... “he was given a Squadron with the greatest difficulty, as being 30 he was over-age. He was typical of the type which is serving and saving England.” On August 20<sup>th</sup>, Winston Churchill’s haunting oratory recorded the world’s gratitude “to the British airmen who are turning the tide of the World War by their prowess and by their devotion. Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few. All our hearts go out to the fighter pilots, whose brilliant actions we see with our own eyes day after day...” The sublime few numbered 2,927 aircrew of which 1,441 were killed or wounded.

Nick and his boys are acutely aware that it is feats of courage and fortitude such as witnessed in the Battle of Britain that lend *Holt’s* guns the best stories. “Let’s be honest about it,” says Chris. “It’s these guys who provide half our sales pitch.

Some of the most interesting guns we have may not be too interesting as guns *per se*, but attach a wonderful story to a gun and it is transformed.” The Bertie Wootten gun with its compelling provenance is surely a case in point, and the buyer can now access this story along with all the others in a new form. For the first time *Holt’s* are offering an online facsimile of the catalogue in all its customary glory in pdf form. For a nominal charge of £5, a buyer can access and download this pdf wherever and whenever he chooses, and print off as much or as little as is required - with or without the pictures. And then access it off-line. From where I’m standing, that’s a bargain. “To acknowledge *Holt’s* debt to the armed services,” says Chris, “we have decided to donate 50% of the fee to charity, choosing a different charity for each sale. That’s when Roland piped up with a plea for the Royal Airforce Association’s Wings Appeal.”

Roland’s plea was heartfelt. The Battle of Britain was made real for him by tales of his “Uncle Sam” who in 1940 was Officer Commanding 82 Squadron, and who insisted on flying operations over Germany long after he should have been flying a desk. Eventually this same Uncle Sam rose to become Marshal of the Royal Air Force The Lord Elworthy KG, GCB, CBE, DSO, LVO, DFC, AFC and serve as Chief of the Air Staff, then ultimately as Chief of Defence Staff until his retirement in 1971. As a schoolboy, Roland’s imagination was fired by the paper wings pinned to every lapel each September to signify support for the annual RAFA Wings Appeal. “You don’t see the little paper wings now,” he sighs. “Only people involved in the Battle of Britain rattled the tins and the few, largely, have left us.” Nevertheless, the charity continues with sterling work, and money raised by the Wings Appeal provides much-needed welfare services for serving and ex-RAF personnel and their families. A WWII veteran may need a shoulder to lean on, a respite break or sheltered housing: Wings is there to help.

The highest accolade Roland gives to anyone is a rollicking: “he’s bloody good fun”. He bestows it, without reservation, on Bertie Wootten and also on his widow. “Ann Wootten is *very* good fun,” he reports. And how right he is. Having read Lot 1701’s provenance, I suggest to Mrs Wootten, now in her late eighties, that her husband had a talent for living. “They all did,” she agrees. “They all enjoyed life, some of them more than others...!” Was their dash and bravura tempered with an immense discipline and resolution, simply to survive? “They were very individual people – from all walks of life, of course,” she explains, “and they each had their individual way of flying. When Air Vice-Marshal Park said they could do their own thing in battle, I think that’s when they came into their own. They didn’t like being in the big wings and following each other, they wanted to get down and do what they could individually. Don’t forget some of them were very green – they were put into the Battle having had no experience.”

Married in 1947, this former WRNS officer acquired by default an encyclopaedic knowledge of RAF history. “I’m a Norfolk girl born and bred,” says Mrs Wootten, “and my father lost his farm (not the house) to the RAF before the War started. When everything was over, my husband was stationed there, at Horsham St Faith.” She adds, with a peal of laughter: “I thought he was rather nice, of course... And because he was commanding 245 Squadron, the first jet aircraft squadron after the War: Meteor 4s, I knew he was rather special.” She recalls the respect accorded to “flyers”, although “they never talked about the Battle, not to us. They talked amongst

themselves; they always kept in touch. A lot of them were burned very badly. Bertie was shot down, and was rescued in the Channel. I have his parachute still! Spitfires were very versatile,” she says, “and much easier than the Hurricane to manoeuvre. Bertie would prefer a Spitfire to a Hurricane always. I’m going up in one soon! My husband was a very big chap - 6’3” and 16stone. But there’s more room than you think in little aeroplanes. He continued to fly whenever he could. As Station Commander with 4 Lightning Squadron, he flew every day with them – going through the sound barrier aged 54 with a heart condition....”

A special breed. Bertie Wootten died in 2008 aged 80.

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